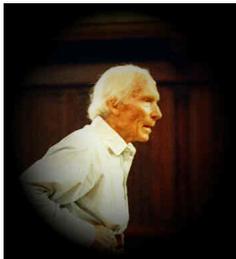


## What Stays with Me

Written by Dr. Lee Patrick  
Friday, 14 May 2010 11:51 -

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On May 15th of this year (2000), the musical world will celebrate the ninety-third birthday of the great musician and saxophonist Sigurd M. Raschèr. No doubt, others much more eloquent than I will honor him by adding to the store of remembrances of him as a teacher and artist. I want to take a different tack and recall some of the aspects of the man that have little or nothing to do with music or the saxophone.

Responding to a question from one of my students, I once described Mr. Raschèr as a very great philosopher who is also an extraordinary musician who happens to be a great saxophonist. An older composer friend who heard this response agreed with the accuracy of my appraisal. It was a spur-of-the-moment description, and I have given considerable thought to since. The more I think about it, the more I appreciate the rich variety of experiences I remember as I look back over more than forty years that Mr. Raschèr and I have known one another.

My experiences with him have dealt as much with learning to think clearly as with making music with the saxophone. Sloppy thinking was *never* tolerated. From my current vantage point, it is easy for me to see why this is so. The saxophone, because of its inherent flexibility, is the perfect instrument for the “thinking” person. Once one has acquired some basic technique, it is a wonderful instrument through which to express one’s thoughts. If you are thinking clearly, this is reflected in your playing; if not, the results are random and unpredictable. One of the keys to clear thinking is the precise use of written and spoken language.

English is not Mr. Raschèr’s native tongue, but his knowledge of it and his subtle facility with it puts most native speakers to shame. “Listen to what the language tells us,” I have heard him say countless times. Probably I have heard as much about linguistic precision as I have about music from Mr. Raschèr. Scarcely a day passes that I don’t hear him inside my head correcting me as I struggle to express myself clearly. To him words are important.

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“In the beginning was the Word,” wrote John the Evangelist. Words have geographic origins, derivations, and literal meanings, all of which should be considered when we write, read, and speak.

Every time I hear a piece of music described as “hard,” in my mind’s eye I see Mr. Raschèr tapping on some solid object and saying, “This is hard; the music is difficult.” I think also of the clear distinction he always draws between the words “educated” and “trained.” One applies to conscious human thinking, while the other applies to behavior patterns developed below the level of consciousness, as with training animals. Mr. Raschèr touches on this distinction in the foreword to his scale book. These are but two examples, I could cite many others. Whenever I see or hear one of these words misused, I know that I have entered the realm of the sloppy thinker. I know that sloppy thinking leads to undesirable results, and I am always on my guard.

Mr. Raschèr has encouraged me and others to think for ourselves by suggesting that we read advertisements and political tracts with a critical eye and mind. I remember fondly the rollicking good times we had while reading the advertising copy for new and improved saxophones and saxophone accessories. I doubt that Madison Avenue will ever mount a tribute to Mr. Raschèr! This does not mean, however, that he encouraged any of his students to be Luddites. If something new was a definite improvement on the old, it was certainly encouraged.

Through the years I had the opportunity to observe how Mr. Raschèr was often ahead of the curve on the major problems of the day. In the late 1950s, when I began to visit his home fairly often, he was concerned about the indiscriminate use of pesticides. I remember his efforts to see that the pesticides used by his neighbors or the government didn’t contaminate his property. All of this was before Rachel Carson brought the problem to world attention with the publication in 1962 of *Silent Spring*. Today, most of the world’s industrialized countries have taken steps to curtail such pollution.

At another time, when nuclear power plants were hailed as the wave of the future, he spearheaded a successful drive to prevent more than one from being built in the part of the country where he lives. Since then, some nuclear power plants already under construction were abandoned before their completion, and others were redesigned—at great expense—to accommodate non-nuclear methods of energy production.

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One of Mr. Raschèr's most profound philosophical contributions is ***Do you Listen?*** (1994, Carl Fischer), a collection of mental exercises for saxophone players. This gift to us is the distillation of a lifetime of clear thinking about music making. The concept of the book is so far ahead of the current state of music education in the United States that I suspect it will be a long time before musicians in general begin to understand and appreciate what he has given us in this slim volume.

Mr. Raschèr was eighty-seven years old when ***Do you Listen?*** was published. He must have regarded the publication of this book as an affirmation of his faith in an optimistic future, when thinking and saxophone playing are no longer commonly considered to be mutually exclusive activities.

At ninetythree, he still attends concerts and listens to recordings sent to him by friends and students. How wonderful it is that he continues to do so with a musical intellect that seems as lively and focused now as it was when I first met him nearly half a lifetime ago!

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